WORKING LIFE

THE GLOBE AND MAIL • MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2000

Dot-com careers among riskiest

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

JIM CARROLL

Should you quit your job to join a dot-com?

It's a question more and more people are asking themselves. It seems there is a massive exodus from the traditional business world to the universe of the dot-com.

Most recently, the business press has reported on the flood of professionals from leading U.S. law firms to the high-profile Silicon Valley Internet startups.

Certainly, the temptations spurring such moves are strong — particularly the stock options associated with dot-coms. These perks appear to be on an ever-increasing upward spiral, guaranteed to make you rich beyond your wildest dreams.

But it's not just the draw of the money that is gaining attention. Stuck in a humdrum job in a company that doesn't "get" the e-biz revolution, many people simply want to join the excitement of the dot-com universe, and become part of the work force that is out to change the world economy.

There's a party going on, and the natural inclination for people is to want to take part.

Yet most people pondering such a move also realize there is undeniable risk with any Internet organization. Unproven business models, spotty revenues, and uncertain guarantees regarding long-term survival make a dot-com career one of the riskiest around.

While a number of high-profile winners are being featured in the media, there are an equal number of lowly foot soldiers labouring in the trenches, barely enjoying the fruits of the revolution.

If you want an idea of how bad things can get, take a look at the book *Net Slaves: True Tales of Working the Web* by Bill Lessard and Steve Baldwin.

The opportunity seems so exciting, yet the risk seems so high. What should you do?

First, take the leap of faith into the dot-com universe only if you can weather any possible storm. This means that you should have a secure financial background, the skills to bounce back into a "regular job," and an attitude that it won't be a crushing blow if you, or the company you join, fails.

Second, take the time to carefully research the organization that you join. There are a huge number of dot-coms out there, and some, quite simply, don't deserve to be in business, and probably won't be within a year.

Of particular note, be cautious in joining on-line retail ventures. I'm convinced that the long-term survival of many of these organizations is doubtful. The real opportunities are found in companies focusing on business-to-business commerce, Internet infrastructure, and e-commerce software development.

What's more, the companies that concentrate on supporting serious e-commerce ventures are bound to be a big emerging market, as well. Look for opportunities in customer-support applications, business re-engineering firms, consulting organizations and other such support businesses.

Third, make sure that your leap into the dot-com world involves a career and a job that mixes technical and business skills. Don't get yourself in a situation where you are just technically focused, since it is the business background that is so important.

It's crucial that you don't get pegged as a "techie," since that might doom you to the type of career described in *Net Slaves*.

In addition, find out if the company you currently work for plans to establish a separate e-commerce division or company. I'm convinced that in the next little while, we will see the emergence of many dot-coms which have an umbilical cord link to a larger, established organization.

Many big companies have come to realize that they are simply unable to cope with the rapid rate of change and cultural uniqueness of the e-commerce/. Internet world. To move forward, they will establish separate divisions or even separate companies to take their e-commerce strategies forward. Joining one of these organizations might make more sense and be far less risky than a full-fledged jump to a dot-com.

Last but not least, be realistic, and don't get in over your head. Something big is happening with the Internet and e-commerce; wonderful new careers beckon. But there are tremendous risks, big challenges, and an uncertain future with any organization, and so extreme caution has to be the watchword.

◆ ◆ ◆

Jim Carroll is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future, *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*